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Pros, Cons and Contras

Hints of a deal with Nicaragua, and even Congress?

As the Reagan Administration shuffled its lineup of Central American policy-makers, the most controversial aspect of that policy seemed to be producing signs of an opportunity for diplomatic movement. Harassed by U.S.-backed guerrillas operating along its borders, the Marxist-led Sandinista government of Nicaragua gave subtle hints that it might be willing to make a deal. The suggestion was made by Sandinista Leaders Daniel Ortega Saavedra and Sergio Ramirez Mercado in interviews with *TIME* (see box), and was embedded in the usual condemnations of U.S. policy. Ortega and Ramirez not only restated Nicaragua's longstanding willingness to link the two issues in negotiations, but also reiterated their desire for such a dialogue with fresh urgency. They also offered perhaps the clearest official admission to date that the *contras* have become a major worry for Nicaragua. Said Ramirez: "What we would like to talk about with the U.S. is a mutual commitment"—an end to U.S. backing of the *contras* in exchange for the Sandinistas' stopping any support that the U.S. can prove they are providing for Salvadoran guerrillas based in Nicaragua. It remains questionable just what the Sandinistas would accept as proof and how they could be kept to the terms of a possible deal.

Paradoxically, the sign that the Sandinistas might be budging came as the Administration was facing an increasingly stubborn Congress over the persistent question of whether the U.S. should be financing the *contras* at all. Many Congressmen think not. Their concern was heightened last week by the assassination of Lieut. Commander Albert Schaufelberger in the Salvadoran capital of San Salvador. But there is growing anxiety among other members of Congress that they may be blamed if Central America goes Communist. Before last week's assassination of Commander Schaufelberger, the House Intelligence Committee voted to cut off U.S. covert aid to the estimated 7,000 *contras* in Nicaragua. However, moderate Democrats in the House Foreign Affairs Committee, realizing that a straight cutoff would never get by the Senate or the President, are trying to work out a compromise.

In the Senate, the majority of members are willing to give the Administration the benefit of the doubt, at least for a while. The Senate Intelligence Committee has agreed to continue funds for the U.S. clandestine action against the Sandinistas until Sept. 30, and only afterward will require further approval of such money. The Administration hopes that both houses will

go for a compromise along those lines. Among the specific proposals discussed is a possible bicameral veto of covert action, or the formation of a special congressional committee with veto power over such activity. Either way, it would mean offering Congress unprecedented authority over the clandestine dealings of the CIA.

The congressional ruckus was symptomatic of a rising climate in Washington of suspicion and concern about the Reagan Administration's tactics in dealing with Nicaragua. The Administration has long charged the Sandinista regime with funneling arms to and fomenting revolution in neighboring El Salvador at the behest of Cuba and the Soviet Union. The White House has continuously vowed to halt that activity by any means possible. Among those means has been backing the *contras*, on the grounds that their function has been to interdict the flow of arms from Nicaragua.

Now, however, the initial operation seems to have gone well beyond this aim. U.S. officials have been talking about the benefits of "symmetry," the latest buzzword in Washington. By symmetry Administration policymakers mean doing to the Sandinistas what the Sandinistas are doing to the government of El Salvador, namely backing a group of insurgents aimed at its overthrow. Some U.S. officials are convinced of the need to harass the Nicaraguans in order to impress upon

them the notion that they cannot export revolution with impunity. Symmetry could come to imply that the Sandinistas may have to negotiate a political accommodation with the *contras* along the lines of the negotiated power sharing that some leftists in El Salvador are seeking. Some U.S. officials would like to see the eventual collapse of the Managuan government, which has become increasingly totalitarian in its domestic policies, and increasingly unpopular. Certainly that is what the Sandinistas believe is the main Administration motive. Said Ramirez: "If he could do it, Reagan would finish us off with a neutron bomb. But he can't, so he's using the *contras* instead." For its part, the White House last week continued to

emphasize that its policies are within the scope of congressional restrictions, in that the *contras* are clearly not strong enough to defeat the heavily armed Nicaraguan defense forces—a fact that even some Administration opponents concede.

The uncertainty about the Administration's intentions has not been alleviated by President Reagan's recent references to the *contras* as "freedom fighters" and by reports of significant increases in the size of the *contra* forces. Earlier this year, the U.S.-backed guerrillas numbered only about 2,000 to 3,000, less than half their current strength.

In addition, the *contras* have been stepping up the frequency and ferocity of their raids in recent weeks. There is fear

of more attacks as the counterrevolutionaries try to establish permanent bases on Nicaraguan soil. "That is a terrible prospect," says the Sandinistas' Ramirez. "Already this year we have had 500 military and civilian casualties in the fighting with the *contras*. In the U.S. the proportional loss would be about 50,000 people."

Such pressure could be a major factor encouraging the Sandinistas to strike a bargain with the U.S. to call off the *contras*. The problem is that Nicaragua has long been willing to discuss such a deal—but unwilling to do anything about its side of the putative bargain. For more than two years, the Sandinistas have offered to squelch any support from their territory for the Salvadoran guerrillas if the U.S. would only provide hard information about the location of the aid—an offer repeated in Ortega's interview with *TIME*. For nearly a year, the U.S. has pointed to the existence of a Salvadoran guerrilla command center in the suburban outskirts of the Nicaraguan capital of Managua. The Sandinistas have just as pointedly ignored the U.S. information. Nonetheless, officials in Washington have expressed interest in the latest Nicaraguan offer of cooperation. They would hardly believe in Nicaraguan sincerity, however, if the Managua command station did not shut down.

Late last week the State Department attempted to back up its claims of Nicaragua

aid to the Salvadoran rebels by releasing its second White Paper in two years on the subject (the first was issued in February 1981). Once again Washington asserted that Cuba, with Soviet help, was trying to "consolidate control of the Sandinista directorate in Nicaragua and to overthrow the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala."

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